

'THE IMPERATIVES OF SCIENCE EDUCATION AS A PATHWAY TO GETTING THE COUNTRY ON THE RIGHT TRACK', BEING THE REMARKS OF CHIEF WOLE OLANIPEKUN *, CFR, SAN, AS CHAIRMAN OF THE 27TH ANNUAL LECTURE, AWARD OF HONOURS & POSTGRADUATE SCHOLARSHIPS OF STEPHEN OLUWOLE AWOKOYA FOUNDATION FOR SCIENCE EDUCATION, HELD AT MUSON CENTRE, ONIKAN, LAGOS, ON TUESDAY, 18TH MARCH, 2025

1.0 PROTOCOLS

2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 By a letter dated **January 3, 2025**, titled '**Invitation as Chairman at the 2025 Annual Lecture, Award of Honours & Post-Graduate Scholarships**', I was invited to chair this **27th Annual Lecture, Award of Honours, and Postgraduate Scholarships Ceremony**, organized by the **Board of Trustees** of the **Stephen Oluwole Awokoya Foundation for Science Education**. Prior to this, the **Pro-Chancellor** and **Chairman of the Governing Council** of **Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, Prof. Toyin Ashiru**, had called me on phone, entreating me to accept the Invitation from the **Board of Trustees** to chair this occasion, as he was privy to the discussion. Precisely, on **October 31, 2024**, **Prof. Ayo Ogunye**, the **Chairman** of the **Board of Trustees**, whispered to me while we were at the same function at the **University of Lagos** that he had instructed **Prof. Toyin Ashiru** to ensure my presence at this event. I considered this '**whisper**' as a '**command**' from **Prof. Ayo Ogunye** whom I have always held in very high esteem.

2.2 Thus, by the time I received the formal letter around the first week of **January 2025**, I had made up my mind that, God willing, I would make myself available for this very important gathering, which is in honour of a **renowned** and **highly venerated educationist, celebrated administrator, towering humanist, and quintessential pathfinder, Chief S. O. Awokoya**.

3.0 THE GENESIS OF UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION

3.1 Records have it that sometime in **July 1952**, **Chief S. O. Awokoya**, the then **Minister of Education for Western Region**, presented a comprehensive set of proposals for a free, universal and compulsory education, otherwise known as the **Universal Primary Education (U.P.E.)** for the **Western Region** by **January 1955**.² To engender the feasibility of such programme without drastically distorting standards, the ingenious **Minister** included in his proposals a massive Teacher-Training Programme, the expansion of Teacher-Training facilities and Secondary Schools, the introduction of Secondary Technical Schools and Secondary Modern Schools.³

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² See Awokoya's Proposal for Universal Primary Education, 1952

³ See The Western House of Assembly Debates, 30th July, 1952

3.2 Flowing from the foregoing background, **Chief Obafemi Awolowo**, on **January 17, 1955**, launched the groundbreaking initiative that transformed the educational landscape of the old **Western Region**, that is, the **(U.P.E.) Scheme**, till date. The Scheme made primary education free and compulsory for children aged **5 to 13**, and it was the largest free primary education program in Africa at the time. To lend more credence to this position, **Babs Fafunwa**, in his book titled, **“Education in Africa: A Comparative Survey”** aptly described the Scheme as, **“the boldest and perhaps the most unprecedented educational scheme in Africa...”**. To my mind, the Scheme demonstrates the genuine and unpretentious commitment of the **Western Regional Government** to the concerns and interests of the citizenry.⁴ The Region witnessed a dramatic increase in school enrolment. By the end of **1955**, over **800,000** children were enrolled in Primary Schools, a significant rise from the previous figures, and the Government allocated substantial resources to ensure the success of the Scheme, with education expenditure accounting for a significant portion of its budget. The vanguards of the Scheme believed that commitment to education was essential for economic growth, development, advancement and prosperity. The late **Sage** was often quoted as saying, **“Every Nigerian citizen must be educated at public expense to the limits of his natural ability, to enable him to be in the finest possible state to produce the utmost he is capable of”**.

3.3 Let me make an open confession; I was a beneficiary of that creative idea, which can aptly be described as an educational renaissance in the old **Western Region**; a Scheme that undoubtedly provided a forefront advantage to those of us from the then **Western Region**.

4.0 SCIENCE EDUCATION: A PATHWAY TO GETTING THE COUNTRY ON THE RIGHT TRACK

4.1 To my mind, the summary of science education is not merely about imparting knowledge; it is about fostering a culture of inquiry, nurturing critical thinking, and inspiring innovation. Its mission and focus should be to equip our youth with the tools to navigate the complexities of the modern world, to harness the power of technology, and to drive sustainable development. Nowadays, the knowledge of science education is of tremendous advantage to all professionals, including but not limited to Medicine, Engineering, Law, Accounting, Business Administration, Teaching, Banking, Theology, etc.

5.0 THE EVOLUTION OF DIGITAL LITERACY AND AI

5.1 Fast forward to the present day, we find ourselves in the midst of a digital revolution. The advent of digital literacy and artificial intelligence has transformed the landscape of education, presenting us with unprecedented opportunities and challenges. The classroom of today is no longer confined to four walls; it is a boundless expanse of virtual spaces, where knowledge is but a click away.

⁴ S. Ademola Ajayi, “The Development of Free Primary Education Scheme in Western Nigeria, 1952-1966: An Analysis”

5.2 Today, we stand on the brink of a new era in science, one that promises to redefine the boundaries of human abilities and capabilities. Just recently, while surfing the internet, I received a notification and clicked on the link. In the blink of an eye, I was directed to a mind-blowing montage of a sophisticated robotic system that simultaneously removes the heads of both a donor and a recipient. The recipient's head is then transferred systematically onto the donor's body. The intricate procedure is guided by what is known as **Advanced Robotics, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and Real-Time Molecular-Level Imaging**, to ensure precise reconnection of the spinal cord, nerves, and blood vessels⁵. This scientific revolution is championed by **BrainBridge Technology** which offers new hope to patients with **terminal illnesses and neurodegenerative diseases**. This ambitious project exemplifies the superpower of scientific evolution.

6.0 GETTING THE COUNTRY ON THE RIGHT TRACK

6.1 To get our country on the right track, we must prioritize science education as a national imperative. We must invest in our educational institutions, support our educators, and create an environment that fosters scientific inquiry and innovation. By doing so, we will cultivate a generation of thinkers, innovators, and leaders who will drive our nation towards a brighter future.

6.2 Let me further illustrate the above thesis with the life and times of **Chief S. O Awokoya**. **His was a life dedicated to the service of humanity; undiluted love and passion for education; burning desire to raise disciples who would man the future (and most of us here this afternoon constitute a fraction of those disciples); and a stern and godly resolve to leave the world a better place than he met it.**

6.3 Just recently, at a **Round Table Conference** in **London, United Kingdom**, a client of mine paid a glowing tribute to this departed hero by narrating how **Chief S. O Awokoya** took cognizance of him despite his '**lowliest state**'. How did this happen? According to the narrator (name withheld), he was from the **Mid-Western** part of the old **Western Region**, attending a Secondary School in **Port-Harcourt**. He was financially stranded while in **Form 1** and was about to be sent out of school. Suddenly, a thought crept into his mind! Since his **Regional Government** was so passionate about providing education for all the youths who desired it, he should write to the then **Minister of Education, Chief S. O. Awokoya** at Ibadan, to divulge his pitiable and miserable situation and solicit the **Regional Government's** assistance, either in term of a scholarship or bursary award. The young man acted on this idea, put pen to paper and sent a letter to the **Hon. Minister of Education, Chief S. O. Awokoya**. To his amazement, a week later, he received a reply personally signed by the **Minister**, informing him that the **Regional Premier; Chief Obafemi Awolowo**, had approved that he should be given a Scholarship. To his further surprise (which was a pleasant

⁵ Elizabeth Karpen, New York Post, titled "*Startup Claims they have created AI head transplant system, plans to perform first procedure within decade*" May 22, 2024, via <https://nypost.com/2024/04/22/us-news/scientists-announces-wild-plan-for-first-head-transplant/> accessed on March 15, 2025.

delight), while he was anticipating a one-term payment, he got a full-year School fees settled within the same period. Luckily for him as well, he later received a **Federal Government Scholarship** while in **Form 2**, due to his brilliance and outstanding performance in the first year.

7.0 CELEBRATING EXCELLENCE AND DEDICATION

7.1 I am always fascinated by the inscription on the headstone of **Niccolò Machiavelli's** tomb in the **Church of Santa Croce, Florence, Italy**, which reads: "**TANTO NOMINI NULLUM PAR ELOGIUM,**" meaning, "**OF THIS GREAT MAN, NO PRAISE IS ADEQUATE.**"⁶ These inspiring wordings aptly describe the worth and relevance of **Chief S. O. Awokoya**, even several years after he has joined the **Saints Triumphant**. The Indelible marks and imprints he etched on humanity cannot be wiped off by the torrents of time. He continues to live in our consciousness and subconsciousness. May **God** grant us the grace to have more people of his very rare but impactful tribe. Since a fruit does not fall too far from the tree, it is not surprising that his children, as well as members of the **Board of Trustees**, who are both direct and indirect beneficiaries of the exceptional grace bestowed on this legend, have taken after him. They are all '**chips off the old block**'. I congratulate you all for keeping the flag flying, not at half-mast, but in its full-fledged manner.

7.2 To the proud **awardees** and **beneficiaries** of today's event, I extend hearty congratulations, but not without an admonition. The admonition is borrowed from the concise words of the **Lord Jesus Christ**, as recorded in **Luke 10:35**, who, after giving the parable of the **Good Samaritan**, admonished his listeners to "**... go and do likewise**". Coincidentally, **Prof. Ayo Ogunye** and my humble self were reminded of this parable as well as the admonition at the same **University of Lagos** event on **October 31, 2024**. What I am saying in effect and conclusion is that the **awardees** and **beneficiaries** should, in the future, when either fate or fortune beckons them, do, act, and behave as and like the **altruistic, indomitable, iconic, progressive, humane** and **god-fearing Chief S. O. Awokoya**.

I thank you all for listening.

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Pro-Chancellor, University of Lagos

March 18, 2025

⁶ See New York Public Library Archive, via <https://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/machiavelli.pdf>; and <https://www.santacroceopera.it/en/catalogue-of-works/niccolo-machiavelli-monumental-tomb-spinazzi/>, titled *Santa Croce Opera, Innocenzo Spinazzi Monumental Tomb of Niccolo Machievelli, 1787*, accessed on March 15, 2025.